



MAKING WINES AND CAREERS



BY JANIS SWITZER

THE CAL POLY WINE AND VITICULTURE PROGRAM is set to become one of the largest viticulture/enology programs in the country.

The program just bottled its first vintage of Cal Poly brand wine, a chardonnay, a pinot noir and a “Mustang Red” – milestones that will fund the program’s expansion.

The program, now in its third year, is uniquely structured between three different departments within the university: Food Science and Nutrition, Agribusiness, and Crop Science. When students select the wine and viticulture major, they can select one of the three areas to specialize in. “It’s a unique, interdisciplinary structure,” said July Ackerman, director of program development. “Our program was really designed to meet the needs of the industry.”

Ackerman has been building the program with program director Mary Pedersen since December 2005. The WVIT program also has an advisory council of successful winery owners to help steer the curriculum and provide industry input based on their needs. The advisory council is headed by Ken Volk, of Kenneth Volk Vineyards. Other local members include Gary Eberle, Chuck Ortman, Kris O’Connor, Matthew Ortman, Dana Merrill and Brian Storrs. Volk, who made wine from campus-grown fruit using a trash can and a baseball bat in the late 1970s, has become “one of our biggest industry supporters,” Ackerman said.

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This year, nearly 70 freshmen enrolled in the program, making it larger in numbers than the renowned UC Davis enology program.

Senior Mike Bruzus was initially admitted to both UC Davis and UC Fresno's enology programs but picked Cal Poly because it was right in the heart of wine country. "Davis and Fresno don't have wineries in their backyard, so you don't get as many opportunities for all this great, hands-on experience," said Bruzus. Now in his fifth harvest, Bruzus is hoping his experience will enable him to be a winemaker at a small winery in the near future.

Bruzus is one of two Cal Poly winemakers this year, in partnership with Nicole Chamberlain. Together they analyzed the fruit, determined when to harvest, crushed the grapes, and eventually made the wine with the assistance of Baileyana winemaker Christian Roguenant at Orcutt Road Cellars.

That process, Chamberlain said, has been the best experience she's had so far in the program. "That was a highlight because I've taken what I've learned in class and been able to apply it to a large scale."

As part of the program's learn-by-doing philosophy, there are vineyards on campus where students grow the grapes that go into their wines, there is a new pilot winery on campus that has the same type of equipment found in small wineries, and there are field trips and visiting winemaker events that offer wine tasting and direct contact with local winemakers. Chamberlain says her trips to Wild Horse Winery, Tolosa and Courtside Cellars were eye-opening.



Thanks to the proximity to wine country, many students work internships at wineries during their summers off, and many work harvests across the county. In addition to their local experience, there is a summer school program in Switzerland and a winter program in Australia that over two dozen students will be taking part in this year.

All the wine was made at Orcutt Road Cellars in San Luis Obispo, the custom-crush facility that is home to Baileyana and Tangent, among other boutique brands, and owned by the Niven family. Ackerman says their support has been crucial.

"The Niven family has just been very supportive of Cal Poly – and very reliant on the work force Cal Poly provides," Ackerman says. "We wouldn't be able to do this without their help."

All elements of the new wines have been the work of Cal Poly students. The label was designed by a student, and students campuswide were involved in all the market research, Web site development and public relations activities necessary to launch the program.

Now that the wines are in the bottle, they will be released sometime in 2008 for distribution online at www.calpoly.com and through the downtown San Luis Obispo tasting room "Taste." All the proceeds benefit the Cal Poly Wine and Viticulture program and will fund some of its future plans, such as a bonded winery on campus where students can make wine for special order sales and alumni. □

